

# FOUR SERIOUS MATTERS *Facing Latin American Mennonites*

by Luis Elier Rodríguez

*Editor's Note: We reprint this article in celebration of FQ's 20th Anniversary. It first appeared in the Winter 1988 issue of Festival Quarterly.*

In my judgment the Mennonite church in Latin America has four primary challenges. The first has to do with facing in a critical way the missionary work carried out in our continent. The second is contextualizing Anabaptism in today's Latin American reality. That is necessary in order that Anabaptism may continue to be viable in the congregations and other communities of faith. The third challenge refers to making peace, rather than simply hoping that fate may bring it about. The fourth has to do with the hope that is necessary and strengthening to the church on the way.

## **Rethinking Missions**

For the most part, the Mennonite church in Latin America has arisen from projects of missionary groups in the United States and Canada. It also has arisen from emigrations from Europe during the first half of this century. The majority of these



FQ/Dawn Ranck





FQ Merle Good

persons were influenced by pietism and others by the strong evangelical influence in the United States. Now the new Latin American Mennonite leadership is questioning the type of mission that has developed and what the new focus should be for today.

One of the problems highlighted by foreign missiology is the fact that mission efforts in the past did not adequately identify the cultural reality of the settings where mission work was being done. Nor was sufficient adaptation made. This was certainly the case in regard to the national identities of Latin American peoples. On many occasions the transmission of faith was done through a white Christ and paternalism about the customs and cultural traits of Latin America. In other words, in the beginning, the missionaries did not contextualize mission. That caused a poor relationship between gospel and culture, and, as a result, a church identity that lacked national identity.

Now the new leadership that has arisen has the desire of making a mission and church life from its own Latin American context.

### Anabaptism: An Option for the Poor

Another task the Latin American churches face is to reinterpret Anabaptism with its radical implications for the Latin American setting. The Anabaptists of the 16th century refused loyalty to the feudal system that produced a society divided into socio-economic classes of feudal lords and peasants. The Latin American neo-Anabaptists want to oppose divisions between rich and poor and situations in which the poor suffer oppression and all its consequences.

The Anabaptist movement serves as an obvious model and inspiration for the Latin American Mennonite church. The Anabaptists refused to participate in the feudal government. They presented the

distribution of goods as an alternative to the feudal socio-economic structure and did not swear oaths or go to war. They did so as a protest against feudal culture. Their refusal to baptize infants was a rejection of the official church and its feudal interests that legitimized the exploitation of the peasants by the feudal lords. Like their 16th century forebears, Latin American Mennonites are beginning to proclaim that Jesus and the Bible help to reorient the disciple and the life of the Mennonite church toward an option for the poor.

This is an option for those people tormented by sorrow, those martyred by suffering—that is, those who are marginalized. It is an option for people that do not cry necessarily for their sins, but because of their condition as outsiders.

It is an option that the church faces in this place of dependency, underdevelopment, and poverty. It is an option that brings the church to declare that poverty is not innocent



neutral, but that it is something  
tal—destructive to life. The option  
r the poor should bring Mennonite  
lievers to ethical and prophetic  
dignation, understanding that God  
es not want poverty because it is  
e fruit of great injustice that cries  
heaven like the blood of Abel  
ordered by Cain (Genesis 4:10).  
Poverty is not something  
cidental. Moreover, the existence  
the poor does not result from  
something missing on the part of a  
ople, an inferiority or a lack of  
ucation. It is historically caused,  
e result of the rich countries that  
rive through political, economic,  
d social structures that originate  
verty.

Because of this, Latin American  
abaptists ask the Mennonites of  
e First World, What is the  
ogram of the Mennonite churches  
the First World to be in solidarity  
h the poor?

### Peace: Well-Being and Just Relations

The third challenge that the  
nnonite church in Latin America  
es is to make peace. This is  
ectly related to the option for the  
or, for one cannot have peace

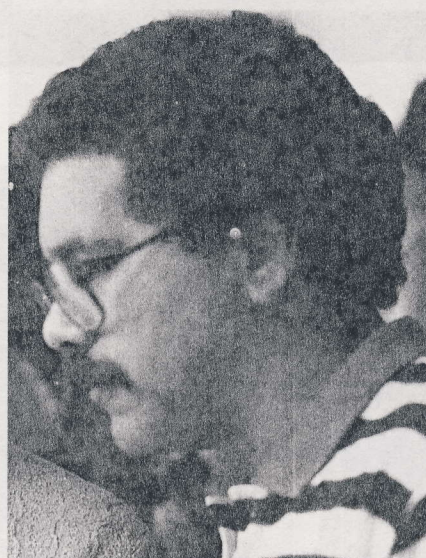
(well-being) if there is poverty. That  
is so because one makes peace to the  
extent that one seeks the common  
good and the establishment of right  
in the life of the poor majority.

The practice of peace in this  
continent translates into our  
determination to transform a social  
order that generates military  
dictators, death squads, foreign  
interventions, constant violation of  
civil rights, military armament, and  
institutionalized corruption. Because  
of all that, one does not speak of  
peace in heaven and glory on earth,  
but of peace on earth and glory in  
heaven.

The challenge consists in not  
making a peace of tranquility,  
passiveness, or absence of conflict,  
but a peace that has to do with just  
human relations, conducive to the  
well-being of persons. It is a peace  
that is willing to have enemies, but  
tries not to exclude those enemies  
from love and a life of peace. It is a  
way of learning and living peace in  
conflict.

### A Church of Hope and the Way

In spite of conflict, the Mennonite  
church wants to develop a



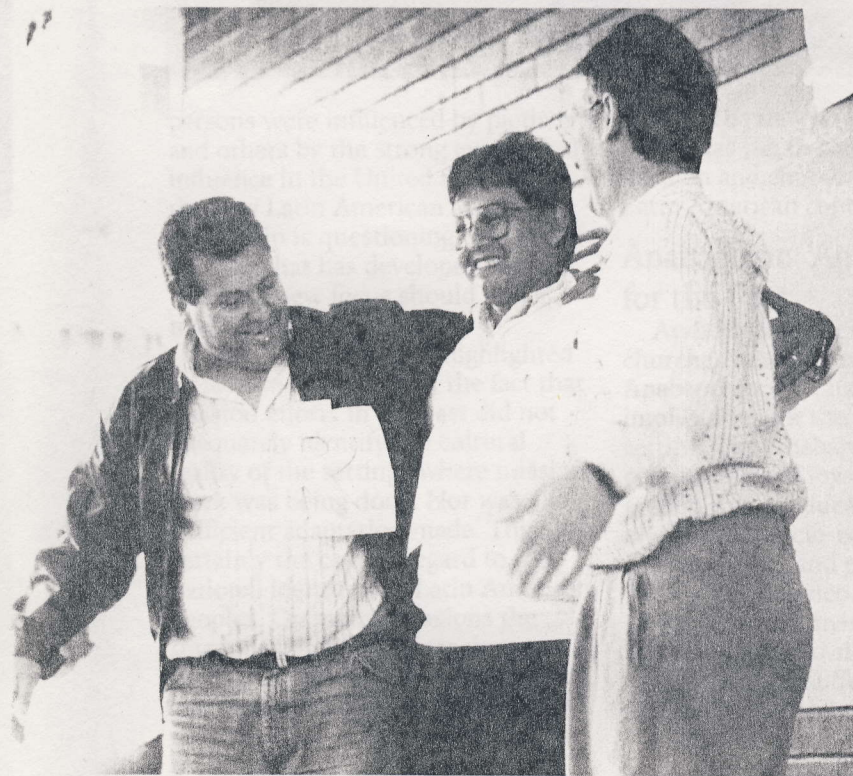
FQ/Merle Good

consciousness of being on the way,  
going in the direction of hope. The  
church accepts that it has not come  
to the goal, for there are still failures  
and occasions of unfaithfulness to  
Jesus. But on the other hand, there  
is no reason to despair, for Jesus  
Christ, the Bible, and Anabaptism  
encourage, exhort, and direct the  
church toward hope. This duality  
always has existed.

On occasion one observes groups  
of unfaithful Christians that have  
been instruments of death and in  
part responsible for the death of  
indigenous populations, for the  
oppression of a great number of  
blacks, and for the establishment of  
unjust social, political, and economic  
systems. But the church also has had  
the testimony of Christian groups  
that have been instruments of  
liberation.

Looking at the history of Latin  
America, one hopes that these  
liberating groups can listen to the  
Anabaptist cries characterized by  
faith in Jesus Christ, by a love for his  
Kingdom, and by a love for our  
continent.

*Luis Elier Rodríguez (pictured above)  
is chaplain at the Mennonite Hospital in  
Aibonito, Puerto Rico. Translated from  
Spanish by David Graybill.*



MEN  
FOO  
FOO  
FROM